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## 'Talking' signals speed meadows' traffic flow

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Photo by Ron Leir

David Liebgold displays one of the camera detection units that are being installed on traffic signals around the meadows district.

By **Ron Leir**

*Observer Correspondent*

### LYNDHURST –

A strange experiment is going on in the marshes: From a remote outpost in the wilds of Lyndhurst, they're trying to get traffic lights to "talk" to each other.

Bet that's got you blinking....

Well, relax, it's part of your federal tax dollars at work in support of the MASSTR (Meadowlands Adaptive Signal System for Traffic Reduction) program, being brought to you by the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission.

NJMC applied for and got \$10 million from the U.S. Department of Transportation through a TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant.

DOT gave out nearly \$500 million nationwide for 47 "road, rail, transit and port projects ... that (will) have a significant impact" on a particular area, according to the department's website, and NJMC is one of the beneficiaries of that federal largess.



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David Liebgold, NJMC's chief of transportation, says much of the meadows district's highways and interconnector roads – traversed by more than 700,000 cars daily – are a mess due to congestion exacerbated by many “outdated, poorly timed, cross jurisdictional and uncoordinated” traffic signals.

This project, Liebgold says, aims to unravel those bottlenecks as much as humanly possible by developing a wireless combination of radios, cameras and computers that will function as a sort of ‘Brainiac of the Roads.’

Right now, Liebgold explains, most of the traffic lights around the 30-square mile meadows district, which comprises 14 municipalities in Hudson and Bergen counties, operate on “fixed timing” intervals no matter how the flow of traffic is going.

What the NJMC proposes to do is provide “full actuation” signals accessorized with cameras and radio units at each approach to an intersection that will allow those signals to “talk to each other.”

To facilitate that communication, the NJMC will be installing “adaptive control computer software” with a “vehicle detection system,” that, according to Liebgold, will “take a camera’s input and adjust the green/red timing and balance the traffic flow to re-time the signals.” Presto! Traffic jam vanishes and traffic magically moves forward, unimpeded .... Hopefully. Unfortunately, that magic won’t be applied to the congestion at the Kingsland Ave. Bridge in Lyndhurst. And it seems unlikely to relieve the rush-hour tie-ups along the Belleville Pike but who knows?



Photos courtesy New Jersey Meadow lands Commission  
Harrison and Freeman installing detection cameras



Photos courtesy New Jersey Meadow lands Commission





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Belleville Tpk and Schulyer detection camera and radio



Photos courtesy New Jersey Meadowlands Commission  
Schulyer and Bergen installing camera and radio

Asked how this new system compares to "staggered" lights that keep northbound and southbound traffic moving at a targeted speed in Manhattan, for example, Liebgold said that system operates on "fixed-time" and it's only on the Avenues – not on the cross streets – so, obviously, there can still be gridlock at intersections.

The meadows system will be unique, Liebgold, said, in that, "It will be the first adaptive signal system in New Jersey and also the largest adaptive signal system to be constructed all at once."

The first phase of the job (29 signals) in Secaucus is nearly complete, Liebgold said. Phase two (37 signals), focusing on the southwestern portion of the district – including Kearny, Lyndhurst and North Arlington – is under way. Parts of Highway Rts. 7, 17 and 120 that cut through the district are part of the job. Subsequent phases that will comprise the northwestern part of the district, Rts. 1&9 and Rt. 46 are soon to follow.

Liebgold anticipates that 115 of approximately 130 signals will be upgraded by Dec. 31, 2013, and the balance by the spring of 2014.

Depending on what type of equipment each signal needs to better communicate, Liebgold figures that the construction cost will average "between \$60,000 and \$100,000 per location."

In Lyndhurst, for example, the NJMC will upgrade signals at Polito Ave. and Wall St.; Orient Way and Marin Ave. (where a new signal is proposed); Orient Way and Valley Brook Ave.; and Orient Way and Page Ave. Additionally, a fiber-optic conduit is to be installed in the road along Polito, from Rutherford Ave. southbound to Valley Brook, and along Valley Brook, eastbound from Polito to the NJMC offices at DeKorte Park.

Temporary lane closures at a typical intersection, necessitated by hanging a radio or TV unit on the traffic signals, takes one to two days, Liebgold said.

When the job is done, the NJMC will monitor the system from a traffic command center being set up at its Lyndhurst headquarters. If a camera or radio unit goes down, that malfunction will be detected on a computer screen "so we'll be able to troubleshoot and adjust the system as we need to," Liebgold said.

The system will also generate real time traffic counts so staff can judge how the revamped signals are impacting vehicular flow.

And if police and/or emergency management units in communities around the district want

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a visual piece of the action, Liebgold said, "We're looking to create a web portal or provide interconnection to local jurisdictions to access (traffic) videostreams."

NJMC experts have set the bar high for the system. As Liebgold puts it, "We expect a \$20 million reduction in annual savings in time for commuters and commercial haulers, a reduction of 600,000 gallons of gasoline consumed annually by reducing idle time; and a reduction of 5,000 tons a year in gas emissions."

"Nationally," Liebgold said, "there'll be a lot of eyes looking at this project."

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